

SIT Graduate Institute/SIT Study Abroad SIT Digital Collections

Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection

SIT Study Abroad

Fall 2009

Vietnamese Resistance Mentality

Michael Williams
SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection



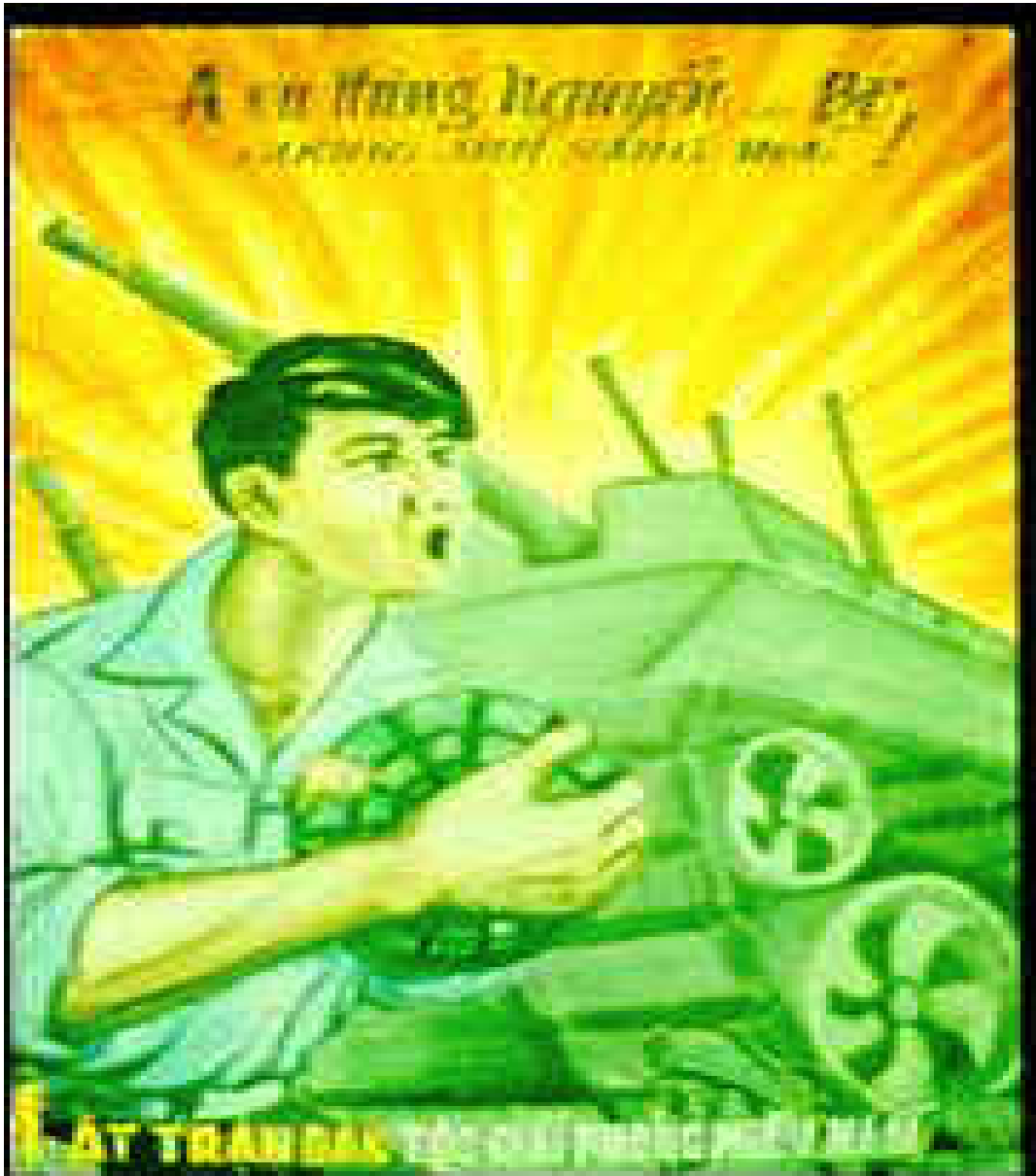
Part of the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Williams, Michael, "Vietnamese Resistance Mentality" (2009). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 791.
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/791

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

Vietnamese Resistance Mentality



Michael Williams

Acknowledgements:

This research paper would not have been possible without the help of a considerable number of people. First and foremost, I must thank my SIT program director Mrs. Duong Van Thanh. To a foreigner, Vietnam can be quite a perplexing maze at times. Traveling, conducting research, and even ordering food in Vietnam can confound even the most ardent cosmopolitan. I can honestly say that I could not have had a better guide to Vietnam than Co Thanh. She seemed to have dozens of friends wherever we traveled, and always knew just the right people to put me in contact with when I was conducting my independent research. Her help in translating documents, as well as interviews, was immeasurable, and I cannot thank her enough for her help with general things like traveling during my research.

Additionally, I would like to thank my program assistant Vy Ho. Over the course of my stay in Vietnam, it was often hard to remember that Vy was actually a member of the SIT staff, and not a good friend to all of us on the program. Her help in organizing the group excursions and arranging travel plans for all of us was incredibly useful. I must also thank David Brown and Douglas Jardine for helping to guide me through the very harrowing world of research in Vietnam. Conducting research in Vietnam can be very difficult. Not only is there an immense language barrier, but there is also an objective truth barrier in historical writings. It was often hard to decipher what was historical fact, and what was often the Party's interpretation of historical events, but David and Douglas helped greatly in continually giving suggestions as to which direction I should take my research.

I would also like to thank the Mr. Tran Huu Chanh and the staff at the Cu Chi Tunnel complex for their insights into the world of the underground Viet Cong. Going into the Cu Chi Tunnels and actually seeing and feeling the small, cramped world that thousands of Vietnamese inhabited during the wars gave me more insight into the determination of the Vietnamese people than any document or memoir ever could. Most of my research could not have been done without the help of the staff at the numerous museums and libraries that I visited during my research period. Despite knowing *chut chut* Vietnamese, the staffs at these institutions were always able to, after must gesturing and broken Vietnamese, direct me to the resources that I needed.

Finally, and above all, I would like to thank the Vietnamese people. The generosity and hospitality of everyone in Vietnam was incredible, and this paper could not have been possible without it. I have never felt more welcomed than in the homes of the Viet Minh and North Vietnamese Army veterans, who were all extremely eager to share their stories and experiences with me. I always had a full cup of tea in front of me, and always left their homes with amazing stories and good memories. Their kindness and humanity was incredible, and I am forever grateful for it.

Notes:

1. All interviews, except for with Tran Huu Chan, were conducted with the aid of translators.
2. In Vietnamese, the family name is placed prior to the individuals name. For example, in the name Nguyen Van Thieu, “Nguyen” is the family name, and “Thieu” is the individual’s name. Nguyen is an extremely common family name in Vietnamese society. None of the interviewees or authors are related.

I. Introduction

By the time tanks of the North Vietnamese Army crashed through the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon to reunify the country in 1975, the United States had spent almost two hundred billion dollars and lost over 58,000 soldiers in Vietnam.¹ From the late 1940's until the fall of Saigon, the United States had been fervently trying to prevent a communist takeover in Vietnam, spending billions to help France retain her Indochinese colonies, and subsequently billions in aid to the successive governments of the southern Republic of Vietnam. Yet despite the massive spending and military superiority, the United States, like France before her, eventually had to withdraw from Vietnam. While Vietnamese today are hesitant to apply such definitive terms as “won and lost” to the result of the conflict (over fifty times as many North Vietnamese died in the war compared to American casualties), the perceived loss by American forces perplexed both the American military command and public. This perception illustrates an inherent and crucial flaw in American attitude during the war. Though the war obviously manifested itself as a military conflict, the underlying driving force of the Vietnamese resistance was overwhelmingly political and social. The Vietnamese Communist party was driven to gain as much popular support as possible, and render occupying forces politically neutral, while the masses of Vietnamese society finally grasped their ability to create lasting change in their country. American commanders in Vietnam seemed ignorant of the almost spiritual attitude that many Vietnamese fought with, often trying to quantify the war in body counts and bombing missions. In 1968, the reporter I.F. Stone

¹ *The Thirty Year War*, The Gioi Publishers, Hanoi, 2001, p. 72

wrote that American policy makers and commanders had no grasp of the true struggle being waged by the Vietnamese:

In reading the military literature on guerilla warfare now so fashionable at the Pentagon, one feels that these writers are like men watching a dance from outside through heavy plate glass windows. They see the motions but they can't hear the music. They put the mechanical gestures down on paper... But what rarely comes through to them are the injured racial feelings, the misery, the rankling slights, the hatred, the devotion, the inspiration and the desperation. So they cannot understand what leads men to abandon wife, children, home... to challenge overwhelming military odds rather than acquiesce any longer in humiliation, injustice, poverty...²

Trying to break the Vietnamese resistance against the French and American forces down into troop numbers and tactical capabilities, as both countries tried to do, is simply an impossibility. To do so would negate the menagerie of forces that coalesced and combined to create the Vietnamese resistance movement that lasted for thirty years, and fall victim to the same trappings that ensnared French and American policy. This research paper is thus not a chronology of events and compilation of figures, but rather an analysis of the mentality, tactics, and motivations of the entire resistance movement, from the peasant to the soldier to the president. Through interviews, memoirs, museum visits, poems, art, propaganda, and historical documents, I will show that the Vietnamese resistance movement during throughout both wars was an extremely well-planned effort that effectively wove together political, social, and military strategies to mobilize an entire population for three decades of intense warfare.

II. Entrenched Politics

Vietnam could very easily be called one of the greatest ideological battlefields in human history. Given the wide range of ideologies that came into direct conflict in Vietnam during the middle of the 20th century, the resistance, at its core, must be

² I.F. Stone, *In a Time of Torment*, (New York: Cape Publishing, 2008) 173

considered a political struggle. A vast majority of the country in the 20th century was still of the peasant-agricultural class, indebted to land-lords who wielded an inordinate amount of power under the auspices of the French colonialists. Many of Ho Chi Minh's policies during the resistance were targeted at giving land back to the peasants, in an effort to replace this feudal state with a more ideal socialist republic. Additionally, Vietnamese nationalism and communism came into direct confrontation on the battlefields of the country with French colonialism, and later American capitalism and imperialism. The importance of politics in shaping Vietnam's future was not lost on President Ho Chi Minh, who unequivocally led the country through both the French and American wars until his death in 1969. Beginning in 1911, Ho Chi Minh, then using his birth-name of Nguyen Ai Quoc, traveled the world, living and working in Paris, New York, London, and Moscow, all the while attending communist meetings and petitioning local governments for the independence of Vietnam.³ In Moscow, Ho Chi Minh became very active in the Comintern, often sitting in as a delegate of Indochina. This work in Moscow, as well as the failure of the Treaty of Versailles to address the needs of colonial peoples, would have a profound effect on Ho Chi Minh's thought as to the liberation of all colonies: "Ho Chi Minh learned something from the failure... national salvation could not be generated from the old political system, nor could it be fostered by relying on support from the new Eastern powers"⁴. Ho Chi Minh concluded that there needed to be a complete upheaval among all members of society to throw off the old systems of French colonialism. Realizing that Vietnam would receive little external help in its quest for independence, the shape of the revolution would necessitate the input from every citizen

³ C. David Thomas, *Ho Chi Minh: A Portrait*, (Hanoi: Youth Publishing House, 2003) 24

⁴ Ministry of National Defense, *Ho Chi Minh Thought on the Military*, (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers 2008) 7

of Vietnam: “A nation which does not rely on its own effort but only waits for another country to come to its aid is not worthy of independence... we must rely on our own efforts”⁵. The political mantra of self-reliance would echo throughout all facets of the resistance, and only by joining together all parts of Vietnamese society, not just the military, could the yoke of French colonialism be completely shed.

In 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared that “to bring the resistance to a successful end, we must mobilize all our forces... the farmer in his rice field, the worker engrossed in his job at the factory, the petty tradeswoman... this is what is called the entire people’s resistance”⁶. Propaganda throughout the entire resistance movement would echo this theme of entire’s people’s resistance, as well as the communist doctrine of union of agriculture and industry. In an exhibition of propaganda art in Hanoi, I came across a poster from 1967, displaying a smiling man working in a factory next to an equally happy woman carrying a bundle of wheat from the fields. The caption under them reads “Cach Mang Goi Ta Vao Tran Moi!” which translates into “Revolution Calls For A New Kind of Combat!”. Every sector of Vietnamese society, including the economy, would have to become a weapon to fight the enemy. The mobilization of both the industrial and agriculture masses in Vietnam would serve a twofold purpose: First, it would give the resistance the much needed popular support if it was to stage an offensive against an overwhelmingly more powerful military; second, it would cut off the French from their economic and political base. As Ho Chi Minh wrote in 1934, “modern imperialism is built on the exploitation of millions of working people in colonies and semi-colonies. That is why it will be demolished totally and for ever only when we succeed in

⁵ *A Collection of Ho Chi Minh’s Works, Vol. 1*, (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia Publishing House, 1995) 164

⁶ *A Collection of Ho Chi Minh’s Works, Vol. 4*, (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia Publishing House 1995) 84

destroying that solid basis”⁷. The necessity for popular support would be a strong undercurrent in the strategies of the Communist Party of Vietnam throughout the wars of resistance.

In order to gain the support of every possible citizen of Vietnam not somehow intrinsically linked to the French or American occupiers, Ho Chi Minh had to bring together an extremely broad coalition of Vietnamese society. This necessitated that some aims of the Party be placed aside in order to accomplish the task at hand: liberation of the country. In a Party document from May of 1941, the leaders of the Party resolved that national liberation comes before any other aim:

During this period of time, the interest of the group, of the classes should be placed under the survival of the nation... if we cannot solve the priority of national liberation; not taking back the independence and freedom for the whole nation, then the whole nation could be seen as the lives of horses and buffalos, and the interests of the groups and classes cannot be taken back for a thousand years.⁸

The communist tenet of the dissolution of class and social hierarchies had to take a back seat to the importance of independence. If the country could not be liberated, then there would be no possibility for class liberation either. The Party needed to utilize every single aspect of Vietnamese society to expel the French, even including what the Party would refer to as the bourgeois class. In his July, 1947 review of the first six months of open resistance against the French, Ho Chi Minh states that the “rich people devoting their talent and efforts to develop their factories and exploit their land are also doing their part”⁹. For the time being, the Communist Party was willing to set aside its differences with capitalist forces in Vietnam in order to defeat the greater threat of colonialism.

⁷ *A Collection of Ho Chi Minh's Works, Vol. 1*, 247

⁸ Quotation from the 8th Congress of the Central Party of the Communist Party of Indochina, May 1941 (Ho Chi Minh Museum)

⁹ *A Collection of Ho Chi Minh's Works, Vol. 4*, 84

Vietnam, however, did not only contain a wide range of social and economic classes. The thousands of years of Chinese and French occupation had left Vietnam with a menagerie of religious sects, and there was much outreach towards these groups. The Party promised the large population of Buddhists that the religious oppression of the Catholic French colonialists would be put to an end. Additionally, numerous leaders in the Catholic Church were invited to participate in the Party conference of 1949.¹⁰ The ability to bring together many disparate groups in Vietnamese society showed the absolute unity among many Vietnamese for the liberation and independence of their country. This broad base of support would prove to be the resistance movement's greatest strength.

The importance of a massive political base for the resistance was essential. It was common knowledge in the upper echelons of the Vietnamese command that the revolution would not succeed if it was conducted solely as a military operation. The overwhelming force of the foreign nations that occupied Vietnam would easily crush a combative movement if it did not have a strong base. Thus, military matters *always* played a secondary role to that of politics.¹¹ When Ho Chi minh ordered General Vo Nguyen Giap to organize the Viet Minh, the first manifestation of an organized revolutionary force, in 1944 to oppose the Japanese occupiers, he stressed that the wording be the "Vietnam Propaganda and Liberation Army", showing the primary role that propaganda and politics would play in the struggle for national liberation.¹² In order to build up the military base necessary to fight foreign occupiers, first a strong political base had to be created. Throughout the entire resistance, the Communist Party would send thousands of political cadres into villages throughout Vietnam to stir up resentment

¹⁰ *The Thirty Year War*, 47

¹¹ *Ho Chi Minh Thought on the Military*, 117

¹² Vo Nguyen Giap, *Fighting Under Siege*, (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2004) 23.

towards the administrative government, and turn their political support toward the communists. Even during the inter-war period, these infiltration agents would play a crucial role in communist strategy. As Ho Chi Minh stated in 1956, “success or failure depends on the capability of [political] cadres because they decide everything. Their training is the Party’s essential work”¹³. These political cadres would go to great lengths to integrate themselves into the community, and level of commitment would serve to help foster a sense of identification with the Party among the most remote locales.

Though foreign occupiers would often go to great lengths to seal villages off from communist forces (the American strategy of “strategic hamlets” is a famous example) political cadres of the Communist Party of Vietnam would often infiltrate small communities to give talks on politics and communism. A former Viet Cong soldier in the American War, Vu Hy Thieu, recounts how “every night we infiltrated those hamlets... we had to explain to them why we opposed the programs and crimes of the enemy”¹⁴. Involvement with the villagers would provide the army not only a strategic foothold, but also an incredibly important sense of unity between the population and the party. Cadres were often from the same areas and of the same ethnicities as the villagers, and additionally, would go to extensive lengths to gain their support. In his journal, Nguyen Van Thieu, a National Liberation Front officer active in South Vietnam during the 1960’s, wrote that “to become accepted by the national minorities, our cadres have not only learned the language; they have also pierced their ears or filed their teeth if that is the custom of the minority in question”¹⁵. This effort to identify with indigenous people

¹³ Ho Chi Minh, *Letters Sent to the Congress of the Party Committee of Interzone V*, 1956

¹⁴ Christian G. Appy, *Patriots*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003) 192

¹⁵ Nguyen Van Thieu, *Our Strategy For Guerilla Warfare*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 311

did not extend solely to soldiers on the ground. General Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of all forces during both wars, recalls learning three different indigenous languages over the course of his command, and Ho Chi Minh's statement to him that "with regard to the people, if the army can win their affection... it will surely win victory"¹⁶. Over 80% of the population in Vietnam during the wars lived in small villages and hamlets, and thus by creating a sense of identification with members of the resistance movement, the revolutionary forces were able to alienate large amounts of support for the government. However, though the affection of villagers could be attained by Viet Minh and Viet Cong cadres through political talks, often more concrete measures were necessary to cement the support of the populace.

Political talks and piercing one's ears may show that the Party had a sense of unity with a local populace, but in order to gain the active support of the people, the Viet Minh and Viet Cong realized that they would in turn have to show the people their support. One of the first acts of the newly-formed Viet Minh in 1944 was to seize large supplies of Japanese rice stocks. Like much of the Pacific during World War Two, Vietnam had been exploited to serve the Japanese war machine. Between 1941 and 1944, Vietnam exported 3.5 million tons of rice to Japan, resulting in a terrible famine that killed almost two million Vietnamese.¹⁷ Helping the famished populations of Vietnam would be the first of many initiatives among the resistance movement to help the masses: "Seizing the Japanese rice stocks to save the famished population was a new and humanitarian form of struggle, having a deep significance in the development of the revolutionary

¹⁶ Giap, 156

¹⁷ *Ho Chi Minh Thought on the Military*, 128

movement”¹⁸. Additionally, throughout both wars, the revolutionary government would seek to intrinsically tie their struggle with that of agriculture, as much of their base lived in rural areas. Other posters at the propaganda exhibition encouraged farmers and peasants to increase yield as much as possible, using such catchy slogans as “Grow food for the state to provide for army to achieve victory!”. Soldiers in the army would often help out with seasonal harvests of rice, helping to bring the populace and Party together: “Our army and militia were responsible for fighting the enemy and helping people harvest and hide crops... the [revolutionary] government reduced land rents by 25 percent and divided abandoned land among poor peasants which brought them closer to the regime”¹⁹. Though communist troops could win the affection and support of people of the villages, often most of the political and economic power resided within the French and later South Vietnamese appointed district chiefs and officials. They controlled both the local police force, as well taxes, and were often the most visible ground level representation of foreign domination.

For the North Vietnamese during the 1950’s, destroying the local political figureheads of villages was an utmost priority. The people were for the most part in alliance with the communist, but these chiefs and officials still wielded most of the local power. By eliminating these local chiefs, the occupying force would lose its last vestige of authority in an area: “the masses quickly discovered that the most dangerous and also weakest link in the enemy’s coercion system at the village level was the hamlet chief. If this link was done away, the forces of repression would be blinded”²⁰. The importance of eliminating the local chiefs was not lost on the command in Hanoi, which had been

¹⁸ *Ho Chi Minh Thought on the Military*, 131

¹⁹ Giap, 93

²⁰ *The Thirty Year War*, 42

sending thousands of political cadres south to upset Ngo Dinh Diem's grasp on power, even shortly after the 1954 armistice signing. In 1956, the communist leaders in the north gave explicit orders to these political cadres to carry out political assassinations of these chiefs and officials, and it is estimated that during the latter half of the 1950's, there were over two thousand politically motivated killings in the south of Vietnam.²¹ These assassinations were also explicitly ordered to be carried out with knives instead of guns and bombs, which could produce innocent bystanders and alienate the public from the revolutionary forces. The lack of political oversight left the ruling government of Ngo Dinh Diem authoritatively neutered, exercising very little direct control outside of major cities. This was very similar to what happened to the French administrators during the first war, who increasingly found themselves forced to *legiferer dans le vide* (legislate in the void), enacting policies that received absolutely no traction at the ground level. By effectively winning over the support of the rural populace, as well as cutting off the villages from the ruling administration, the revolutionary movement was able to create a solid political base to use as a springboard toward other goals.

In revolutionary wars such as the conflict in Vietnam, as shown previously, the people themselves can become political weapons, destroying the legitimacy of any imposed government. Eqbal Ahmad, a member of the Institute of Policy Studies, wrote in 1970 that in revolutionary warfare, "the people are... objects of policy, a means rather to an end, a manipulable [sic], malleable mass whose behavior toward the government is more important than their feelings and attitudes"²². Though the Communist Party of Vietnam did not regard the masses in a manipulative way, they definitely did view them

²¹ *The Thirty Year War*, 47

²² Eqbal Ahmad, *Revolutionary Warfare and Counterinsurgency*, (Berkeley University of California Press, 1982) 257

as a means to an end. The revolution could only succeed with the help of the masses, and further more, victory could only be attained by the decisiveness of military action. Ho Chi Minh knew this, and stated in 1944, that “if we want to fight the French and Japanese, there must be armed combatants. But who wants to volunteer to carry rifles? If we want to win, we must have politically conscious masses who will volunteer to carry rifles”²³. The conflict could not be one waged solely by destroying the legitimacy of the government. Military action had to supplement the political work in villages and cities for any dramatic changes to occur, and these politically conscious soldiers would form the foundation of the ever expanding revolutionary forces.

III. Fighting Under Siege

In order to fight an overwhelming military force such as the French or American armies, the soldiers of the Vietnamese revolutionary forces (this phrase includes the Viet Minh, the Viet Cong, and the regular North Vietnamese Army) had to be completely committed to and aware of the Party doctrine. Political education continued for soldiers throughout the war, and all battalions were led by a military officer and a political commissar. A soldier in the Viet Minh from the start of the resistance, Ngo Van Chieu writes in 1947 that "our political education concentrates on the misdeeds of colonialism and capitalism... I now know why we must support the government, and I am no longer a member of the popular army simply out of blind, stubborn patriotism and a hunger for glory"²⁴. The political education of combatants, however, did not extend to just the soldiers on the front lines. Every aspect of the resistance movement, from the lowest transport agent to generals, received regular political lessons to reinforce their

²³ *A Collection of Ho Chi Minh's Works, Vol. 1*, 229

²⁴ Ngo Vanh Chieu, *The Journal of a Vietminh Combatant*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955)

commitment. Nguyen Huu An, a Senior Lieutenant General of forces in South Vietnam, recalls how as much as twenty percent of strategic staff meetings among senior commanders was devoted to political discussion.²⁵ A group of four female veterans that I interviewed in Hanoi (Nguyen Thi Hoa, Le Thi Van, Nguyen Thi Thanh, and Doan Thi Qui) who had worked on the Ho Chi Minh trail, all recount that though often they were extremely underequipped for their duties, "[they] were fully equipped with thought and the correct political path... the political commissar was a kind man, and he passed on information and thought orally to the soldiers, and there were many discussions". By fully equipping the soldiers and personnel in the army with correct political thought, the Communist Party was able to successfully create a force that had an undying loyalty to the cause. Only complete loyalty was necessary for the army to survive, for its first few years of resistance against the French would not only prove extremely arduous, but also shape the military strategy of the resistance for the next two decades.

In order to wage an effective fight against the French, the Viet Minh leadership realized very early on that the commanders would have to have extremely flexible tactics and strategies to cope with the necessary maturation of the army. The Viet Minh was still in its infancy when the uprising was ordered on December 19th, 1946, and thus would have to go through many changes before it became a fully capable fighting force. Surveying the disparity between French and Vietnamese forces at the outbreak of the war, General Vo Nguyen Giap wrote that "despite the small numerical discrepancy [in troop levels], the difference in organization, equipment technical expertise was great- it marked an epochal backwardness on our part"²⁶. Most of the weapons in the Vietnamese

²⁵ Nguyen Huu An, *The New Battlefield*, (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006) 36

²⁶ Giap, p. 21

arsenal were either captured French or Japanese rifles, or weapons given to the Viet Minh by the American OSS during World War Two, and numbered less than five thousand.²⁷ To keep the overwhelming might of the French army from crushing the young Viet Minh, everything had to be done to delay French advances and build up the army. By building up the army, the Viet Minh could shift to more effective tactics. Between 1946 and 1951, the Viet Minh went through three recognizable phases of strategic combat: insurgency, guerrilla warfare, and then mobile-guerrilla warfare. Each phase built off of the one before it, and the insurgency movement in 1946-47 would prove to one of the most important phases of the entire resistance war.

Before the first shot was fired against French forces, there was consensus among leaders of the Viet Minh that the resistance war could not be won quickly, but rather must focus on grinding down the enemy for a substantial period of time. The longer the war, the less the possibility for victory for the enemy, and the more support in the foreign nation would dwindle. Ho Chi Minh stated that “our resistance needs to be protracted because our country is not large, not densely populated, and moreover, it is poor”²⁸. In this fight for independence, time would prove one of the most valuable assets for the Vietnamese. To prepare the population for a long war, material and foodstuffs began to be stockpiled. A *ten-year* supply of salt was stolen from a French compound in March of 1946, and hidden in the central highlands.²⁹ An incredible amount of importance was placed on outlasting the enemy, and turning Vietnam into a completely un-winnable situation. Referring to the strategy of rural insurgency and guerrilla warfare, General Vo Nguyen Giap wrote that “If these actions become generalized, they would consume the

²⁷ *The Thirty Year War*, 16

²⁸ *Ho Chi Minh Thought on the Military*, 184

²⁹ *The Thirty Year War*, 12

strength of the expeditionary corps and turn Vietnam into a bottomless abyss for the French”³⁰. The need for a long, drawn-out war was evident to all leaders of the Viet Minh, and in order to build up the troops to wage a protracted war for independence, soldiers would first have to resort to insurgent tactics to delay French advances as long as possible.

In late 1946, most of the French forces were concentrated in large northern cities such as Hanoi, Hai Phong, and Hue. When tensions finally came to a head on December 19th, the primary responsibility of the revolutionary forces was to try to keep the French inside of the cities for as long as possible, so that the Viet Minh could regroup and organize in the countryside: “In the beginning, we will try to wear down the enemy... and preserve our strength by pinning down and isolating the French troops for as long as possible in each city, thereby giving our people time to prepare for a lasting war”³¹. Viet Minh soldiers were tasked with keeping the French pinned down in cities for at least a month, buying precious time for the troops in the country side. To fulfill this mission, soldiers resorted to a wide variety of insurgent tactics, all aimed at slowing French advances, and incapacity the army in any way. In Hanoi in particular, thousands of road blocks were set up, combat trenches dug, and holes punched through walls of houses and stores to allow soldiers to pass through. French forces were stationed in the old imperial citadel, which lay in the direct heart of Hanoi. This resistance-infrastructure would cause the French to have to “fight for every house to break out of the city”³². Additionally, sabotage was resorted to, in an effort to deny French forces as many resources as possible. The signal to initiate an offence against the French in Hanoi was the destruction

³⁰ Giap, 161

³¹ Giap, 20

³² *The Thirty Year War*, 35

by bomb of the Yen Phu power plant, cutting power to the city and providing the Viet Minh a cover of darkness. At the same time, bombs ripped through petrol depots throughout the city, as well as the rail station, and in Saigon, rice mills and rubber factories were burned to the ground. However, a bomb planted on the Long Bien bridge failed to destroy the bridge, leaving the French a vital lifeline out of the city. It would be a full two months before the French were able to take full control of the city, twice as long as the soldiers had been ordered. For the next few months, until the late spring of 1947, the Viet Minh would rely primarily on insurgent attacks, sabotaging key infrastructure and creating “general disturbance” for the French, all the while building up their own strength for the next stage of the resistance.

Keeping the French inside of cities was only a stop-gap measure taken to mature Viet Minh forces. Fighting the French in any massive battles would have been suicide at such an early stage, and thus the Viet Minh realized that the only way to fight was to apply guerrilla tactics of ambushes and pitched, small scale battles in addition to their general campaign of sabotage. “In brief, we must avoid deploying large forces in large battles and instead cause difficulty and embarrassment to the enemy by means of many small victories”³³. Fighting by guerrilla means meant that the Viet Minh would constantly be on the offensive, initiating small scale battles and ambushes on unsuspecting French convoys. This tactic of an unceasing offensive mixed with many small battles would remain a mainstay of Vietnamese tactics throughout the entire resistance war. In a document from the famously leaked Pentagon Papers, an assessment of all engagements between American and Vietnamese soldiers found that only 14% of all engagements were fought with the U.S. forces having some prior knowledge of the enemy’s location and

³³ Giap, 21

initiating combat. Vietnamese offences accounted for over 75% of all encounters, with a majority being an organized ambush on American transports or patrols.³⁴ Attacks on French and American transports would be prove highly successful for guerrilla soldiers. Transport was generally the weakest point in an enemy's organization, as convoys could be small and far away from bases and reinforcements. Additionally, by destroying the lead vehicle in a convoy, a small force of soldiers could pin down a much larger force. During the French war, the northern Highway Four came under attack so often that it became known as *la route de sang*, or "the road of blood"³⁵. Over 12% of engagements between U.S. forces and Vietnamese occurred as helicopters were deploying troops to the battlefield, leading to the phrase 'hot landing zone'. One well placed rocket-propelled grenade could destroy a whole helicopter and the unit inside. Strategies such as ambushes and pitched battles provided Vietnamese with relatively few casualties in engagements, as they always almost fought from a fortified or advantageous spot, concealed by thick jungle foliage. Ho Chi Minh, always quick with a metaphor, would often reiterate the need for an advantageous position by stating:

If a one-kilogram weight was placed in a favorable position, its strength develops manifold and it is capable of raising a hundred kilogram object. This is an instance of the victory of position over strength... If a chess-player makes a bad move, he will lose even if with two rooks. Under favorable circumstances, a pawn can bring about victory.³⁶

The use of good position necessitates a thorough knowledge of the surrounding terrain. Whenever possible, Viet Minh and Viet Cong soldiers were stationed in their own home provinces and districts, or at the very least had a local guide. This not only ensured an inbred knowledge of terrain and strategic points, but also negated the lack of resources of

³⁴ James W. McCoy, *Secrets of the Viet Cong*, (New York: Hippocrene Books 2003) 5

³⁵ Giap, p. 134

³⁶ *A Collection of Ho Chi Minh's Works, Vol. 3*, (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia Publishing House, 1995) 287

the armies, as many soldiers could be sheltered and fed by their own families.³⁷ Guerrilla attacks not only hampered enemy efforts at limited cost to Vietnamese soldiers, but would often net the guerrillas valuable captured weapons. However, the effect of small-scale operations was minimal compared to the decisiveness of larger, battalion and division sized battles. These captured munitions would help to push the resistance movement into the next phase of battle.

Up until 1949, the Vietnamese had been fighting French forces primarily with guerrilla tactics, where timing and position were the deciding factors for victory. Never did Vietnamese firepower equal that of the French. However, by 1949, Vietnamese forces had captured enough guns and gained enough manpower to begin larger assaults on fortified positions. The generals in the Viet-Minh referred to this new tactic as 'Mobile-Guerrilla' warfare, combining the successfulness of guerrilla tactics with the might of larger and better equipped forces.³⁸ This new strategy was mainly applied in two scenarios. In the first scenario, guerilla fighters would ambush a convoy or surprise attack an enemy position and withdraw, scattering the enemy, and having them give chase to the guerrillas. The confusion among the enemy then served as a perfect strategic situation for larger forces to mop up: "Thus, guerrillas could annihilate the enemy, creating a battle array favorable to us, forcing the enemy to scatter their forces and get bogged down in passive positions, creating opportunity for our regular army to deal violent blows..."³⁹. The second strategy by which mobile-guerilla warfare was employed was an effective combination of the guerilla capability of ambush, and the excessive manpower of a regular army. The Viet Minh army regulars would lay siege to an enemy strong-hold,

³⁷ *The Thirty Year War*, 54

³⁸ Giap, 65

³⁹ *Ho Chi Minh Thought on the Military*, 279

drawing reinforcements towards the area to help the besieged French troops. Guerrilla fighters would then ambush these transports, causing more losses for the French. This tactic was applied throughout much of the northwest, and carried through to the American war. Nguyen Huu An stated that he often used this tactic against American ground troops and their airborne reinforcements: “Our combat guidelines were to fight from small to medium scale, kill part of the enemy, and strive to shoot down plenty of their reinforcing aircraft”⁴⁰. However, larger forces also highlighted the often crippling inability for the resistance to provide for its soldiers. General Nguyen Huu An describes that before any operation involving large operations, “one of the big questions always was: ‘Do we have enough rice?’”⁴¹. Though operations involving large numbers of troops were often unsustainable for extended periods of time, the tactic of guerilla-mobile warfare would form the basis of military strategy for the rest of the war. By combining large and small scale operations, the Vietnamese could apply pressure on enemy forces in every aspect of battle.

The ability of the Viet Minh to begin using larger forces resulted in one of the most profound and influential strategies of the war. Surveying the army's newfound ability to attack larger forces, general Vo Nguyen Giap developed the concept of ‘Independent Companies, Concentrated Battalions’. Though still within the canon of mobile-guerilla warfare, this new concept allowed for an extreme degree of flexibility for Vietnamese forces: “Independent companies must be sent out to form a core fighting force and promote general guerrilla warfare. The main force battalions would carry out

⁴⁰ An, 27

⁴¹ An, 53

mobile fighting in each locality and along major communication lines"⁴². This tactic would not only force the enemy to fight both large and small attacks, but also provide commanders with an extreme amount of flexibility. By being independent of direct orders from the chain of command, company commanders in the field were free to apply tactics that they deemed appropriate to battlefield conditions. Company commanders were generally given the guideline to "harass and annihilate small parts of the enemy forces, to carry out local sabotages, and to help with armed propagation work"⁴³, and then left to their own devices to carry out these tasks. Nguyen Cao Phan, commander of a company of about 150 soldiers during the American war, told me that he rarely used orders from central command. Instead, he told me that they would "use on-site strategies, and fully utilize guerrilla tactics to fight the enemy. The two tactics we used frequently when confronting soldiers were *Cai Ram Luc* and *Nam That Lung Tried*". These two tactics mean, respectively, 'to enmesh yourself in enemy lines' and 'to fight by the enemy's belt', and both point to how guerrilla fighters negated many of the strategic advances of American forces. By being small and highly mobile, guerrilla fighters could enmesh with American forces for close quarters combat, destroying any pretense of battle lines. These tactics thus negated American air superiority, for American soldiers would be too entangled with the Vietnamese to order an artillery strike or air bombardment. The 'Independent Companies, Concentrated Battalions' tactic would prove perhaps the most successful tactic in Vietnamese strategy, as it was almost constantly applied for the next two decades. While companies could fight with limited resources and weapons, battalions need much larger firepower to produce decisive victories.

⁴² Giap, 120

⁴³ Giap, 125

The introduction of mobile-guerilla warfare into the Viet Minh army would prove to have a profound effect on the military, and became a self-accelerating force. The more weapons guerrillas seized, the larger the regular army became, and the more capable the as a whole Viet Minh became at capturing and holding land. The enhanced capability of the regular army allowed it to fight the large kind of battles that produced decisive victories. The battle at Dong Khe in September of 1950 would prove to be one of the most decisive of the war, as it not only resulted in the first major French defeat, but also provided a crucial lifeline for the Viet Minh to Chinese border, where vast amounts of supplies and aid waited. In February of 1950, Ho Chi Minh visited Moscow, where he was able to secure the support of both the Soviet Union and the newly formed Peoples Republic of China: "Stalin... agreed to provide some aid to the Viet Minh troops, more specifically a regiment of 37mm anti-aircraft guns, several Molotov trucks, and some medicine. In addition, China would arm one infantry division and an artillery unit. The Soviet aid would be conveyed through China"⁴⁴. This aid would greatly increase the Viet Minh tactical capability, and the numbers of downed French aircraft would increase each year following Dong Khe- over 435 aircraft were captured or destroyed. It was in fact the Viet Minh new-found capability to down French aircraft and direct artillery led to the defeat of French forces at Dien Bien Phu.⁴⁵ Isolated in the northwest, Dien Bien Phu's only lifeline for reinforcements was by air, and General Vo Nguyen Giap made sure to deny the French any air superiority- over forty French aircraft were shot down during the two month siege, and thousands of shells were lobbed onto the French encampment. Foreign aid would play a large role in Vietnamese strategy during the American war as

⁴⁴ Mari Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China*, (New York: Routledge, 2009) 15

⁴⁵ *The Thirty Year War*, 65

well. Lacking the industrialization necessary for a domestic air force, the North Vietnamese had to rely entirely on Soviet aid to combat American jets and bombers. The grounds of the Military History Museum in Hanoi are littered with Mig 19s and Mig 21s, as well as a wide range of Soviet surface to air missiles. Though foreign aid would go a long way toward helping Vietnam defeat both the French and Americans, it was by no means the decisive factor. The true strength of the revolutionary movement lay in the determination of every Vietnamese behind it. Though only a small part of the Vietnamese population was capable of carrying rifles and marching long distances, there was a support network of tens of millions behind them, ensuring victory. As Ho Chi Minh declared, “you need not go to the front to be worthy of being called a combatant”⁴⁶.

IV. Every Village A Fortress, Every Citizen A Combatant

To defeat the French colonialists, the massive support of every single citizen of Vietnam was necessary. Throughout the entire resistance movement, there existed a mentality that the fight was not just on the shoulders of soldiers on the frontlines, but on the shoulders of every single citizen who worked towards national independence. In reviewing the uprising against the French, Ho Chi Minh explicitly states that “each citizen is a combatant... each village is a combat trench... and twenty million Vietnamese are determined to smash these few thousand reactionaries”⁴⁷. This solidarity would prove to be one of the resistance movement’s greatest assets. If the people in the villages were not able to actively fight, they could support the war in other means by giving soldiers shelter, information, and carrying out acts of sabotage to hinder the enemy. These

⁴⁶ *Ho Chi Minh Thought On The Military*, 180

⁴⁷ *A Collection of Ho Chi Minh’s Works*, Vol. 1, 160

masses, finally politically awakened and actively involved in the resistance, would be a great thorn in the side of the occupying forces.

The resistance war against the French and American occupants would be a conflict waged almost entirely in the rural countryside. Because of the overwhelming might of the foreign war machines, it became necessary to hide regular troops and guerrilla fighters wherever possible. The mountainous, jungle terrain of Vietnam served to hide troops well, but in more agricultural terrain, other measures had to be taken: "In the plains, there are no mountains and forests, but there are mountains and seas of people. Thus if all the people are of the same mind, guerrilla fighters can hide among the people and act in absolute secrecy"⁴⁸. The ability to vanish into the populace would be a useful trick in the arsenal of revolutionary guerrilla fighters, confounding many of their uniform-wearing enemies. In fact, many of the uniforms handed out by North Vietnam during the American war were intended to look exactly like peasant clothing. A weapons transport convoy on the Gianh River were given clothes and fishing nets identical to that of the local fisherman, as well as fishing permits bearing the signature of the local commissioner.⁴⁹ In addition to providing the ability to hide guerrilla warriors, villages and hamlets went to great lengths to help and support these fighters. When one of his soldiers was wounded, Dang Vu Hiep, a commander of North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam in the 1960's, recalls how "a young woman from the Benai ethnic minority wounded herself so that she could go to the enemy post and ask for medicine, which she brought back to treat the wounded soldier"⁵⁰. Stories of sacrifice like this are not uncommon during the resistance movement. Many times, villagers would sacrifice

⁴⁸ Giap, 75

⁴⁹ *The Thirty Year War*, 51

⁵⁰ Appy, 11

their own lives before betraying any knowledge to government agents. The story of the peasant Nguyen Huy Coung became famous all over Vietnam during the fight against the French. When enemy agents were informed that Mr. Nguyen was hiding troops in dugouts hidden on his property, they ordered him to show them the guerrilla's location. Mr. Nguyen refused, and every fifteen minutes, the agents killed one of his children. Mr. Nguyen still refused, and eventually laid down his own life after all three of his children were dead.⁵¹ Acts of sacrifice such as this show the absolutely level of devotion that many villagers had to the cause of national liberation, impeding occupying forces in whatever way they could and helping the resistance fighters. However, much of the support of fighters did not involve self-sacrifice, but rather a kind of familial affection for these young men.

In the Museum of Vietnamese Women in Hanoi, there is a special section devoted to the "Heroic War Mothers". Many of the now septua-and-octogenarian women have been praised by the Vietnamese government for giving birth to as many children as possible (some mothers had up to twelve) to sustain the war effort. However, some of the women conferred the title had no children during the war, but rather treated soldiers as if they were their own children. The wars tore families apart, as many young men had to travel hundreds of miles on foot away from home, and villages realized that these soldiers needed a warm familial atmosphere. Ngo Vanh Chieu, wrote that "the War Mothers are usually elderly women who take it upon themselves to adopt a soldier in the popular army... should it happen that the 'adoptive son's' unit be dispersed by an enemy attack, he can seek out the family, who will provide him with shelter... [and] vouch for him to the

⁵¹ Giap, 167

enemy authorities"⁵². These war mothers served to strengthen the bonds of class solidarity between the army and the people. When a mother can care for a soldier like a son, her stake in the war effort becomes personal. Additionally, the institution of war mothers brought a great sense of unity among disparate villages, for these mothers knew that their children would be receiving the same kind of care from someone else.⁵³ The housing and care of soldiers definitely went beyond a duty of the villagers, and became a show of absolute affection for the soldiers. When I interviewed Nguyen Loung Phuc, a regular in the North Vietnam Army during the American war, in Hanoi in 2009, he recalled how "whenever my unit had to move out of Long An province, the villagers were always sad, and so were we. We became very close with the families, and missed them while fighting. The villagers loved us, and we loved them". Though the level of affection between soldiers and villagers gave a great morale boost to all sides, often housing soldiers was not enough, and many villagers took up arms against the enemy by any means they could.

Though Ho Chi Minh would often state that Marxism-Leninism was more powerful than bombs and bullets, the political will of the people had to be translated into action. Vietnam, however, was still a primarily agricultural society, and access to industrial weapons such as grenades or rifles was extremely limited- one Viet Minh veteran that I interviewed stated that his first weapon was a flint-lock rifle from Napoleonic times. To counter this extreme lack of munitions, Ho Chi Minh composed a poem in 1947 that was distributed to each province:

⁵² *The Journal of a Vietminh Combatant*, 118

⁵³ *The Thirty Year War*, 59

*No matter young or old
man or woman, everyone
must wage guerilla warfare
having no rifles
we use knives
we use pickaxes
we use rakes
we take shoulder poles
we pull out hedge rows
to beat them down⁵⁴*

Indeed, the addition use of agricultural tools in fighting off the French was not purely a metaphor. At the Military History Museum in Hanoi, there is a large collection of hoes and shovels that were used by peasants to attack French soldiers. In addition to these agriculture-turn-combat implements are more clever means by which villagers killed the foreign occupants of their villages. On display in the museum is a ceremonial wine jug that Moc Chau Son La poisoned to kill 12 French soldiers. The French had been invited into the village to participate in a ceremonial ritual as a false show of cooperation.

Villagers also resorted to more conventional, albeit still primitive compared to French technology, means of fighting the French. As late as 1952, crossbows were still being employed by ethnic minority villages to attack enemy troops, and on display at the museum was a famous crossbow used by Trieu Van Khin in 1950 to kill five French soldiers marching through his village. The ability of peasants to kill much better equipped soldiers points to a major asset in the resistance's arsenal; namely, they were fighting on their home territory. Villagers and guerrilla fighters would use their knowledge of the surrounding territory to cause an absolute sense of fear for French and American soldiers whenever they left their fortified bases.

⁵⁴ Ho Chi Minh Museum, Hanoi

Over the course of the resistance movement, Vietnamese guerrilla fighters and villagers waged as much of a psychological war as they did a physical, combative war. As mentioned above, the ability for fighters to blend into the populace continually frustrated both major powers. Creating an environment where the enemy never could feel at ease was thus deemed essential to the movement, as it would force a more hasty withdrawal: "The aim of guerrilla warfare... consists in picking the enemy off gradually, fighting so as to prevent them from enjoying their meal, or having a good sleep... wearing them out materially and spiritually until their fighting spirit is annihilated"⁵⁵. The only place that guerrilla warriors had access to French and American soldiers was when they were travelling on the road or on patrol in villages. Villagers and locals would often be aware of these routes, and place numerous traps and bombs along them. When I interviewed To Thong, member of the Viet Minh who fought from the earliest stages of the resistance in Hanoi, he laughs with some nostalgia at some of the methods his unit employed against the French: "We were ordered to *trung doc chien* (be a bacteria) for the French for as long as possible... we would often hide grenades and mines in buffalo dung, and set them off when convoys came past". Additionally, villagers and guerrilla combatants would fashion useless pieces of metal to look like mines, causing the French waste time, men, and material circumventing these illusions. Tactics such as these no doubt created an intense sense of fear among French soldiers, for once they stepped out of their bases, anything could be a possible weapon or trap. Because local citizens and guerilla fighters knew the lay of the land extremely well and set the traps themselves, they were able to avoid these traps very well. More so than bombs, old-fashioned hunting

⁵⁵ *Ho Chi Minh Thought on the Military*, 172

traps served as the guerilla movement's ultimate psychological weapon, especially for American soldiers.

Seventy-five kilometers northwest of Saigon lay the famous Cu Chi tunnel system, a two hundred and fifty kilometer network of tunnels that served to house Viet Cong soldiers and the local populace. The site, now a historical tourist destination, contains a wide variety of booby traps employed throughout the fields of Cu Chi. Most were simple, camouflaged swinging trap door mechanisms that let victims fall onto some formation of spikes. Many of these traps must have taken hours to dig, and could obviously only be used once, as they would have been covered over once discovered. Mr. Tran Huu Chan, the current director of the site, told me that these booby traps served primarily as a psychological weapon: "The purpose was to make the soldiers afraid of walking around... the aim was to wound the soldier, not kill, so that he would call out and his friends would hear his screams". These booby-traps also served as tactical weapons, diverting and concentrating important enemy resources. As Mr. Tran explained to me, "doctors and medics and other soldiers would have to come help the friend to remove him from the traps. This made for good targets to ambush and fire upon." Being attacked by guerrilla forces while trying to extricate a fellow soldier from a viscous booby-trap most have had a profound effect on the psyche of the American soldier, and this was absolutely the intention of the revolutionary forces. By making war as viscous and unpredictable as possible, the hope was that the American soldiers would lose their combat psyche and begin to question the government policy in Vietnam:

Ho Chi Minh also advocated attack on the morale of enemy troops. He considered most of the enemy troops as victims, forced to serve as cannon fodder in order to protect the interests of the colonialist system. In his opinion, these troops were an important force that needed to be awakened so that they

could recognize the difference between the just and the unjust war, between the righteousness and the unrighteousness and lay down their arms and return to their families and people.⁵⁶

The use of booby-traps in Vietnam was extremely profuse, which must have had a great effect on American morale. By Mr. Tran's estimates, a single acre of land in the expansive Cu Chi battlefield may have contained as many as four or five of these hand-dug death-traps. Though the villages served as the frontline for much of the wars, an equally important part of the resistance effort were the crucial supply routes linking north to south during the American war, built and maintained for the most part by women.

The Truong Son Supply Route, more commonly referred to as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was a network of roads, paths, and rivers running through Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia that served to deliver troops and supplies to the south. The Communist Party of North Vietnam commissioned the trail in 1959, and due to the need for physically fit men to serve in battles, young women were selected to help maintain, expand, and guide soldiers along the trails. In the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, Ho Chi Minh cites the American Declaration of Independence but replaces one key word: "All the *peoples* on the earth are equal from birth"⁵⁷. Ho Chi Minh strove to create a society equal not just for all classes, but for all sexes. Nowhere was this goal realized more than on the Truong Son Trail; women worked as equally hard as their male counterparts, and earned an equal amount of respect. Though women were utilized on the trail instead of fighting on the front lines (though some guerrilla fighters, and even commanders, were women), they suffered just as much hardship as their male infantry counterparts. Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Huu An wrote that "those men and women working in the realm of

⁵⁶ *Ho Chi Minh Thought on the Military*, 281

⁵⁷ *The Declaration of Independence of Vietnam*, 1945

transportation along the Truong Song range had to face hardship and dangers no less than the infantrymen in the battlefield”⁵⁸.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was heavily bombed during the American war, and women were always at the ready to repair it to keep supplies flowing towards the south. In her book *Even The Women Must Fight*, historian Karen Gottschang Turner writes how the Ho Chi Minh trail became the closest thing to a “gender-neutral environment” in Vietnam: “Gender was not the criterion for distributing tasks, and the sources show that women were involved in every aspect of work”⁵⁹. Because of the sense of imminent death at all times while working on the trail, gender differences were put aside, as every single able-bodied person was needed to maintain the southward flow of equipment. Many Vietnamese Generals have claimed that the organization and efficiency of the Truong Son Trail was one of the key reasons the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army were able to apply enough constant pressure to force the American withdrawal. The group of four female veterans I that interviewed in Hanoi all had worked on the Truong Son Trail, starting when they were seventeen years old, the minimum age for entrance into the military (though anyone who volunteered was accepted almost regardless of age), and worked on the trail until the end of the war in 1975. All four women recall that though they had to march less distances than men, they worked themselves to the same level of exhaustion as the men. When I asked if any of them had any regrets about spending so much of their youth doing hard labor, the answer is unanimous: “We were always happy on the trail, even in hard times, because we were striving toward a just goal... We always sang to stay happy, and you couldn’t hear the bombs when we sang.

⁵⁸ *The New Battlefield*, 89

⁵⁹ Karen Gottschang Turner, *Even the Women Must Fight*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 1998) 124

We thought that if you feared the bombs, then they would surely kill you”. These incredibly brave women were praised extensively by the Communist Party, many receiving the title of hero of the nation. Their importance of their job as transport for supplies was much lauded to the public during the war. Many of the examples of propaganda I came across show strong, resolute women carrying munitions or supplies, with slogans underneath saying phrases like “Transport ammunition to liberate country!” Ho Chi Minh often claimed that the revolution could only be carried forward on the backs of a strong rear support, with every person doing the work of two. The women working on the Truong Son trail fully realized this assertion, as the revolution in the south was quite literally carried on their backs. It was this unyielding determination by every Vietnamese that would prove the revolutionary movement’s ultimate trump card.

V. Unity, Unity, Great Unity; Success, Success, Great Success

French and American forces could, as American General Westmoreland said, “bomb Vietnam back to the stone age- it’s only a matter of how much punishment the enemy is willing to take”⁶⁰. As it turned out, the Vietnamese were willing to take more punishment than America could dish out. Though revolutionary forces may have lacked the technological and material advantages of their foes, they had an overwhelming supply of spirit, and an unequivocal belief in their cause. All of the veterans that I interviewed, male and female, said that they never for once believed that victory was unattainable, despite the incredible hardships they had to endure. When speaking to Jean Sainteny, the French commissioner of northern Vietnam, shortly before hostilities broke out between

⁶⁰ Appy, 60

the Viet Minh and French, Ho Chi Minh stated that “if we must fight, we will fight. You will kill ten of my men while we will kill one of yours. But you will be the ones to end up exhausted”⁶¹. Though Ho Chi Minh calculation turned out to be extremely understated, it no less denoted the absolute determination of the Vietnamese revolution. No matter the losses, Vietnam was resolute throughout the entire struggle with French and American forces. Every single Vietnamese fighting or supporting the resistance knew in their heart that they would outlast the occupying forces. This resolution brought about an incredible sense of unity among every person in Vietnam. Without this unity, determination, and unfailing spirit of the people, the war would have been surely lost for the revolutionary forces.

As mentioned previously, the American war created an intense amount of hardship for the Vietnamese people. Yet despite it all, Vietnamese were still willing to take up arms to fight an overwhelmingly powerful army. Familial ties are a strong part of Vietnamese society, and the quest to defeat American troops and force them out of the south was often thought of as a quest to liberate ones own brother. Many of the veterans that I talked with describe that they all ‘answered the call of the south’ when they joined the army. The ‘call of the south’ was seen as a distress call of a brother, and it became the responsibility of every North Vietnamese to rescue their brothers in the south. By answering this call, every single person in the army also became spiritual brothers with each other. There was a great deal of affection for all members of the resistance, no matter the rank or distance between them. To this day, all Vietnamese still affectionately refer to Ho Chi Minh as ‘Bac Ho’, which mean Uncle Ho. When I interviewed Nguyen Cao Phan and Loung Phuc, both veterans of the American war, they began to tear up

⁶¹ Thomas, 86

when speaking about General Vo Nguyen Giap. General Giap's health has been in decline for the last few years, and his proximity to death caused these battle-hardened veterans to weep, as if he were a member of their family. It is hard to imagine the average American GI in Vietnam weeping for LBJ or Nixon. Despite having never met Giap, both soldiers say that they never felt distant from him, and that the war unified them all under one cause. This unity was persistent throughout the war. One of the major orders that Ho Chi Minh gave to commanders in the field was that they should be as close as possible to their troops: "If the soldiers have no rice to eat, no warm clothes to wear, no place to sleep... the commander should not eat his fill, keep himself warm, or sleep soundly"⁶². Additionally, when rice supplies began to dwindle during the American war, Ho Chi Minh ordered that everyone, regardless of rank, had to plant 1,200 cassava plants. President Ho himself even kept a garden of the plants.⁶³ Ho Chi Minh's extremely modest lifestyle as well served to strengthen the bond between all levels of the resistance. While president of North Vietnam during the war, Ho Chi Minh lived in a small, simple, two room house on stilts, one room for working, and one room for sleeping. When I visited the house, it was quite a strange feeling to realize my hotel room was bigger than President Ho Chi Minh's entire living space. By having all members, from the top down, share in the same experiences of the war, the revolutionary forces created one solid, immovable mass of people and spirit.

The belief that the Vietnamese could outlast the French and Americans carried with it the notion that the future, despite the hardships of the present, would be a much more pleasant time. This notion of a better tomorrow was what fueled many of the

⁶² Giap, 96

⁶³ An, 53

revolutions supporters, and was echoed in Ho Chi Minh's Testament, published posthumously in 1969: "Our mountains will always be, our rivers will always be, our people will always be; The American invaders defeated, we will rebuild our land ten times more beautiful"⁶⁴. The promise of tomorrow allowed millions of Vietnamese to endure incredible hardships. In particular, the tunnels of Cu Chi were some of the most arduous places in all of Vietnam. According to Mr. Tran, as many as sixteen thousand soldiers and ten thousand villagers could be living in cramped spaces of the tunnels, most tunnels being about two feet wide by 3 and a half feet tall. During intensive combat and bombing periods, people could spend as much as a week underground without surfacing, and many people spent over ten years living in the tunnels. The length of time spent by some people in these tunnels is a total testament to absolute will of the Vietnamese to endure and outlast the American army. When I toured the tunnels with Mr. Tran, I found it hard to stay below the surface for half an hour, let alone ten years. The air quality was extremely poor, the constant crouching hurt my back, and the seemingly endless expanses of darkness before and behind me were very trying psychologically. The sense of claustrophobia in these tunnels was extremely overbearing. Additionally, many of the tunnels were booby-trapped, and people had to memorize the layout completely by memory, to avoid information falling into the hands of the enemy. Yet, somehow, people endured, and even thrived in these spaces. Several babies were born, raised, and educated in this expansive network of bunkers and tunnels. When I asked Mr. Tran about the morale of people living in the tunnels, if any got dispirited or committed suicide, his answer testified to the inhabitants resolution: "People sometimes were sad, when their villages were bombed aboveground. But they knew if they got sad and distracted, we

⁶⁴ Ho Chi Minh, *President Ho Chi Minh's Testament*, (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers 2008) 52

would lose. The people were always thinking of freedom and independence, so they could endure anything with their strong mind”. This ability to endure one’s own physical and emotional for the promise of freedom and independence points to one of the key themes of the resistance: The dissolution of the self in favor of the cause.

The most important soldiers to the revolutionary cause were the martyrs, the people who had given their life for the continuation of the struggle. Much of the propaganda I came across hails these soldiers as absolute heroes, and their stories were widely disseminated. The story of Nguyen Noc Nhat, who died fighting off French advances to allow compatriots to flee Hanoi, was widely reported, even after he turned up alive.⁶⁵ The movement needed people who were willing to endure as much as possible without hesitation, and without much support. Soldiers and civilians had to be islands of endurance unto themselves, yet all striving towards the same objective. Nguyen Cao Phan recalls with some amazement at his stamina endurance while walking the Ho Chi minh trail: “I am surprised at how far I walked, and how much I was able to carry, and didn’t think of the difficulty. We used to say that the American soldier had eighty people behind him, feeding him and clothing him. We had to take carry the whole war on our backs”. So long as the entire people were in union, striving for the same goal, the individual could endure almost anything to realize that goal. The story of La Van Cau is wholly representative that imperative. As I sat in his Hanoi household, the former Lieutenant General, an official hero of the country, recounted to me how he lost his arm while a foot soldier at the battle of Dong Khe in 1950:

⁶⁵ Ahmad, 263

The French were very strong at Dong Khe. They had many bunkers and bases, and we needed to get through their forces to reach China. Uncle Ho sent a letter to my battalion, saying that we absolutely had to succeed to perpetuate the revolution. We all took a vow to give our last breath at Dong Khe. I was in a ten man group, and our mission was to destroy a bunker so a larger force could pass through. My friend and I charged with a twelve kilogram bomb, but as we got close, there was a loud sound and much pain, and I passed out. I woke up and I thought that I was dead in heaven. I was sad because I was not able to serve Uncle Ho and the country any longer. But then I heard more gunshots and realized I was still in the battle. I sat up and saw that my arm had been shot off, and was dangling from my shoulder. I still had not completed my mission, and asked my friend to cut off the rest of my arm. He refused at first, but then I told him to let me go forward so others are not killed. He consented and cut the rest off with a Chinese sword that we had. I ran forward to the bunker, placed the bomb, and as I was returning, the bomb exploded and knocked me out again. I woke up to the sound of soldiers running past, and was so happy because I knew we had victory. I got up, and then walked three kilometers through the jungle to the infirmary.

Despite his incredible heroics at the Battle of Dong Khe, Mr. La does not consider himself a hero. He cites many other acts of heroism performed at Dong Khe, and says that he was only doing his duty. This selflessness shows that an individual's pain and agony was irrelevant in relation to the revolutionary movement. When Mr. La wakes up believing he is dead, his first thought is not of himself, but rather his perceived failure at supporting and carrying forward the revolution. Additionally, Mr. La told me that he at first regretted losing his arm, because he could no longer serve the revolution, but then was happy when he received a job teaching new recruits politics and strategy. Vietnamese were always willing to serve the cause, no matter what happened to the individual. In Ho Chi Minh's Last Testament, he explains that in dying, "I would have nothing to regret, except not being able to serve longer and more"⁶⁶. From the President on down to the common foot soldier, the individual's pain or death did not matter. Only their ability to support and carry forward the revolution mattered. People can be killed and infrastructure bombed,

⁶⁶ *President Ho Chi Minh's Testament*, 53

but so long as the idea of the revolution existed in the hearts and minds of every Vietnamese, no amount of munitions could stop the inevitable march towards victory.

VI. Conclusion

In the purview of conventional warfare, the Vietnamese revolutionary movement was perhaps the least equipped force on the planet. For much of the struggle, the forces of Vietnam had no air force, no heavy artillery, extremely little rations and supplies for soldiers on the ground, and often antiquated, sparse, and obsolete weapons. Additionally, the two main opposition forces fought by the resistance were both recent victorious allies in the largest conflict in human history. The disparity between the military capabilities of the Vietnamese resistance and the French and American armies could not have been greater. From the beginning, it seemed that the war was already lost. In an ultimatum delivered to the Viet Minh on December 16th, 1946, from General Louis-Constant Morliere, commander of French troops in North Indochina, stated the dominance that opposition forces believed they held over the Vietnamese: “French forces will establish order security and order in Ha Noi on the morning of 20 December 1946 at the latest”⁶⁷. The French believed it would only be a matter of hours before most of Vietnam was under their control. In fact, it would take approximately ten thousand times as long as Morliere predict before the conflict was finally over, resulting in a victory for the revolutionary forces. This victory was only possible because the Vietnamese created an entirely new kind of warfare. Neither bombs, nor bullets, nor losses, and not even death were considered important factors of the conflict in the eyes of the Vietnamese. In World War Two, the United States dropped 2,057,244 tons of bombs on the Japanese and

⁶⁷ Giap, 14

German war machines, enough to bring about the surrender of each country. In Vietnam, the United States dropped just over 7 million tons of bombs, over three and a half times as many bombs⁶⁸. Yet the Vietnamese war machine could not be subdued. The only thing that mattered to the Vietnamese command was the unequivocal support of the entire populace. As long as the people believed in the movement, no amount of munitions could deny the independence and reunification of the country. Speaking to the Second Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1951, Ho Chi Minh stated the essential principles of the Vietnamese resistance, testifying to absolute ability and will of the people to endure, outlast, and fight in the face of overwhelming odds:

Some people compare our anti-French resistance to a fight between a grasshopper and an elephant! The comparison is true from a narrow-minded point of view. The struggle appears to be highly unequal. In our fight against the enemy's air force and artillery, we only have bamboo spikes! But our party believes in Marxism-Leninism. We do not merely look at the present: we also look to the future. We believe in the spirit of the people, and the strength of the nation. And thus, we can give a firm answer to pessimists and the apathetic: *Today, the struggle seems highly unequal, nothing more than a grasshopper kicking at an elephant! But look tomorrow, and you will see the elephant disemboweled.*⁶⁹

Bibliography

⁶⁸ 15th Field Artillery, "Vietnam War Timeline", <http://www.landscaper.net/timelin.htm>

⁶⁹ *A Collection of Ho Chi Minh's Works, Vol. 1*, 32

Ahmad, Eqbal. *Revolutionary Warfare and Counterinsurgency*, Berkley University of California Press, 1982

Appy , Christian G. *Patriots*, New York: Penguin Books, 2003

Fifteenth Field Artillery, “Vietnam War Timeline”,
<http://www.landscaper.net/timelin.htm>

Ho Chi Minh. *A Collection of Ho Chi Minh’s Works, Vol. 1*, Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia Publishing House, 1995

Ho Chi Minh. *A Collection of Ho Chi Minh’s Works, Vol. 3*, Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia Publishing House, 1995

Ho Chi Minh. *A Collection of Ho Chi Minh’s Works, Vol. 4*, Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia Publishing House 1995

Ho Chi Minh. *The Declaration of Independence of Vietnam*, 1945

Ho Chi Min. *President Ho Chi Minh’s Testament*, Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers 2008

Ho Chi Minh. *Letters Sent to the Congress of the Party Committee of Interzone V*, 1956

Ho Chi Minh Museum. Quotation from the 8th Congress of the Central Party of the Communist Party of Indochina, May 1941

Ministry of National Defense. *Ho Chi Minh Thought on the Military*, Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers 2008

McCoy, James W. *Secrets of the Viet Cong*, New York: Hippocrene Books 2003

Nguyen Huu An. *The New Battlefield*, Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006

Nguyen Van Thieu. *Our Strategy For Guerilla Warfare*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982

Ngo Vanh Chieu. *The Journal of a Vietminh Combatant*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955

Olsen, Mari. *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China*, New York: Routledge, 2009

Stone, I.F. *In a Time of Torment*, New York: Cape Publishing, 2008

The Thirty Year War, The Gioi Publishers, Hanoi, 2001

Thomas, C. David . *Ho Chi Minh: A Portrait*, Hanoi: Youth Publishing House, 2003

Turner. Karen Gottschang. *Even the Women Must Fight*, New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 1998

Vo Nguyen Giap. *Fighting Under Siege*, Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2004